Dappertutto, come la grazia di Dio: The Cathedral Birdhouses and Poetry of Aldobrando Piacenza

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One day in the early 1970s while driving through the Chicago suburb of Highwood, Illinois, painter Christina Ramberg passed a front yard near the corner of Highwood and Everts Place densely installed with handmade birdhouses. Some were displayed close to the ground in neighborhood-like groupings, and several more were installed on high poles along the property's chain link fence (figs. 1-3). Already striking in their number, the birdhouses were even more compelling upon closer inspection—made of sheet metal, salvaged scrap wood from a local lumber yard, and house paint, each was a unique reproduction of an Italian cathedral, featuring diminutive rose windows, ornamented pediments, pilasters, pinnacles, spires often slightly askew, and intricate attached campaniles in which birds might perch. In addition to his architecture-surveying wooden sculptures, the homeowner had painted a mountainous landscape onto an external brick wall, added pink roses to his garage door, staged wood cutouts and whirligigs around the yard, and built a grotto-like rock sculpture at the convergence of his home and a perpendicular property (figs. 4-5). Following the imperative of other Chicago Imagist artists in seeking out vernacular objects and self-taught artists, Ramberg promptly made the acquaintance of the artist and homeowner—an Italian immigrant in his early 80s named Aldobrando Piacenza, and within a year, Piacenza's work was staged in an exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center.

The artist's creative practice expanded beyond the display of sculpture in his Highwood yard, including a series of internal landscape murals, paintings on canvas which hung on all floors of the house, toys and other woodcrafts which he created for family and members of the

broader Highwood community, and an extensive body of poetry, which often described the landscapes, architecture, and history of Italy referred to in his artwork. Though his paintings and cathedral birdhouses are now sold to collectors as distinct art objects, the artist's installed yard and house interior can be understood as a vernacular art environment, as testified to by the show Roger Brown curated at the Hyde Park Art Center in 1971, which attempted to capture the essence of Piacenza's original Highwood home by staging the cathedral birdhouses on tall wooden poles amidst picket fencing, fake grass, and plastic birds (fig. 6). Leslie Umberger, longtime curator of the John Michael Kohler Art Center and current curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian Art Museum, describes the complexity of preserving, collecting, and discussing such environments, which (even after being dismantled, as Piacenza's environment was following his death) are best understood as integrated texts:

> *The fluidity and change that characterize an art environment when an artist is alive can never be regained, and a further degree of loss is incurred when an original location is lost. The reality is, of course, that not all such complex creations can be saved in their original settings. Furthermore, discrete objects can, and do, effectively convey not only the artist's unique vision but also the history of their origins.*[1]

In investigating the multifaceted art practice of Aldo Piacenza, these two scopes—that of the individual cathedral and that of the intertextual system—each offer meaningful frames of reference. Close engagement with his individual models offer insight into the artist's meditative and occasionally solitary personality, objects which point toward personal and formal interiority in their record of devotional labor and compression of architectural scale. Alternatively, his home and grouped birdhouse installations are relational and communal, pointing outward in their

[1] Leslie Umberger, "The Heart of the Real," *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 8.

semi-public context toward a relationship with the community of Highwood and—in their allusion to global architecture—to the Italian community abroad, both of which provided him with instrumental emotional and economic support in the course of his life. The innate fantasy of the miniature object was taken up by Piacenza to shape his domestic reality in Highwood—the act of repetitive housebuilding within his basement studio was a devotional reaffirmation of his individuality and security after many years of residential instability, while his tableaus of global architecture collapsed the space between Highwood and his country of origin as a means of satiating the artist's post-immigration longing. In addition to his own memories, source material for the birdhouses included newspaper clippings and National Geographic magazines, a publication whose exoticizing images of far off locales ironically reacquainted Piacenza with his former life overseas.[2]

Piacenza's poetry, which he produced consistently in the second half of his life and often served to record his life events, will help to elucidate the simultaneous formal scopes of Piacenza's sculptural practice. Written both as a means of confession and as a customized offering of entertainment for special events, Piacenza's poetry worked to create spaces of personal intimacy and spaces of communality. Investigating Piacenza's sculpture and poetry as simultaneously individual and social will speak to the artist's personal history—a story characterized both by a search for personal achievement and one deeply invested and dependent on others.

The sculptures which brought Piacenza mainframe notoriety in the 1970s consist of a broad array of architecture, referencing specific and often notable buildings, such as his

[2] Kenneth C. Burkhart and Lisa Stone, *Chicago Calling: Art Against the Flow* (Chicago: Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, exhibition catalogue, 2017), 135.

exceptionally detailed Milan and Florence cathedrals (figs. 7-8). Though substantially scaled down from their referents, the structures average slightly larger than most commercially available birdhouses, generally around 1.5 feet wide and, with campaniles, occasionally reaching 3.5 feet tall. The scale of the works, in addition to the fact that Piacenza occasionally produced cathedrals without entry points for birds, indicates that the works' utility as birdhousing was perhaps somewhat ancillary, serving as an excuse for an artmaking practice. The cathedral models find formal parallels in a smattering of other works of the Midwest mainframe and vernacular realm—such as H.C. Westermann's architecturally-minded sculpture (fig. 9), Modernist architectural models, or the concrete and found-object house constructions of self-taught artist Jacob Baker in Menominee, Illinois (fig. 10), although Piacenza's residence in Highwood (and preoccupation in various manufacturing and service jobs) left him rather removed from sustained influence by the Midwestern art world during the development of his practice in the mid-20th century. As testified to by Piacenza's extant writing, which in addition to poetry includes two memoirs, the artist's primary concerns in the course of his lifetime were: firstly, the ability to provide economic security for himself and his family, and secondly, his memories of (and longing to return to) Italy. While Piacenza refers to his art practice on only one occasion within his 1959 memoir (as simply "a natural hobby which since my boyhood [I] had always liked"), the rest of his autobiographical writing is riddled with detailed accounts of his monetary exchanges—precise amounts of savings, loan amounts he was able to secure, family debts outstanding and paid, and sales and purchases of land and property.[3]

Born to an impoverished family in the Modenese village of Sant'Annapelago, Piacenza moved to Chicago in 1903, joining many other Italian émigrés of the early 20th century in seeking stable employment. Though he attempted to move back to his home country a number of

[3] Aldobrando Piacenza, "Memoir of Aldobrando Piacenza By [h]imself," (unpublished memoir, 1959), 37.

times throughout his life, the economic opportunity offered by the United States caused him to continually return to the Chicago area, where he worked at a variety of jobs, including as a bread loaf stamper, strawberry vendor, dishwasher, tobacconist, hardware store clerk, sheet metal manufactory employee, school janitor, and saloon employee.

In addition to financial matters, within Piacenza's memoirs are accounts of his travels to and from Italy as he unsuccessfully attempted to repatriate. The architectural sightings these trips provided seem to be both a primary influence upon Piacenza's artmaking as well as integral to his understanding of place and home, as important moments in his life are seen marked by the sight and memory of notable buildings. In addition to Italian churches, American architecture serves as a point of comparison to the Italian landscape, as seen in a poem from the early 1950s:

> A far more loveable place
> speak always to my heart.
> On the Apennines of Modena,
> up there, there is a beautiful pass,
> which rises towards the sky higher than a skyscraper.
> It is to that place that I return,
> that place which is the most beautiful in creation.[4]

Aldo Piacenza's origins in Modena and the broader history of 20th century Italian emigration are both important context to the nostalgia present within the artist's post-retirement art practice. Both of Piacenza's memoirs, one written in Italian in 1956 and another written in English in 1959, make the foundation of S'Annapelago the starting point of the artist's biography. Piacenza describes the land on which the village was founded—surrounded by beech trees, covered in "uneven undular soil," and possessing a number of springs which gather in brooks and descend into a river below. The village, at the time of Piacenza's emigration comprising less than 1,000 people, is located sixty miles from the city of Modena, one thousand

[4] William F. Brooks, Jr., "Aldobrando Piacenza: Italian-American Folk Artist, 1888-1976" (Master's thesis, New York University, 1995), 13.

feet above sea level and three miles to the summit of the Apennines. The reader is given a narration of Sant'Anna's development: consecrated with a church of that name in 1637, founded by "sheepherd and woodcutter which here and there built houses," and connected to other towns by dirt roads until the arrival of the national highway system in the 1850s. The first page of Piacenza's 1959 memoir concludes: "Ther[e] are many things I would like to say about the history of S'Anna, but I know it will not interest you, so I am choosing a brief road so as not to an[n]oy you."[5]

Piacenza was born on August 13, 1888, the son of farm laborers and the second of six siblings. His first cited memories are those listening to his father read aloud during the winter months at their home, which was named Casa del Colle: "I strived to keep my eyes open to hear the wonderful tales he so eloquently narrated."[6] Much else of Piacenza's childhood account, however, centers around a lack of familial money. Receiving minimal returns from Casa del Colle's crop and struggling to support his growing family, Piacenza's father accrued substantial debts; Aldo describes being visited by the city collector in his youth and watching his mother weep frequently as new debts accumulated. The inability to subsist on the land of Sant'Anna was not uncommon. In a Highwood oral history project executed by Adria Bernardi, Apennine land is described by Modenese expatriates as *terra che rende quasi nulla*—land that yields almost nothing.[7] The reality of the land's infertility meant that while far more Appenine villagers owned land than elsewhere in Italy, few were able to live off of it. Because people of this region had to journey to find work, they often had a diversity of skills— historian Roland Sarti notes: "A

[5] Piacenza, unpublished memoir, 1959, 1.
[6] Ibid, 3.
[7] Adria Bernardi, *Houses with Names: the Italian Immigrants of Highwood, Illinois* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 15.

peasant conditioned to appreciate occupational diversification was a peasant confident in his own ability to deal with new situations."[8]

The people of the Apennine mountains left the region to find work all over the world—looking to the plains for construction work; traveling South to Livorno, Pisa, Florence, and Rome; sailing the Meditereanean to Corsica, Sardinia, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria; looking for agricultural, mining, and factory work in southern France, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Belgium; and venturing en masse to North, Central, and South America.[9] Former boarder of the Piacenza household Menghina Moscogni notes that in their search for work, "L'Italiani sono dappertutto—come la grazia di Dio. (*The Italians are everywhere—like the grace of God.*)"[10]

After briefly traveling outside of Sant'Anna with his father to find seasonal farm work, Aldo emigrated to the United States at the age of thirteen along with eight other teenagers and men of his village. Directed to Illinois after docking in New York, Piacenza was sheltered at a home on Fulton Street in downtown Chicago with others who had previously immigrated from Sant'Anna and Pieve. Briefly working at the National Biscuit Company factory, where he was eventually dismissed for being underage, Piacenza began selling strawberries on the street, where he had trouble attracting the attention of buyers due to his inability to yell out in English.[11] Around this time, Piacenza was struck by a streetcar while riding a bicycle, rendering him bedridden for four months and leaving him with a lifelong limp.[12]

After finding himself out of work in Chicago, Piacenza moved thirty miles North to Highwood (which he refers to as "the country") in 1907, where a concentration of people from

[8] Roland Sarti, *Long Live the Strong: a History of Rural Society in the Apennine Mountains* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 120.
[9] Bernardi, *Houses with Names*, 34.
[10] Menghina Mocogni, *Houses with Names*, 34.
[11] Bernardi, *Houses with Names*, 68-69.
[12] Piacenza, unpublished memoir, 1959, 11.

Sant'Anna had settled, drawn to a service industry which had grown around an influx of wealthy Swedish immigrants.[13] In 1909, Piacenza returned home to Sant'Anna for the first time, leaving his parents with some of his earnings and returning to Highwood after a few months to continue earning money. In 1919, after serving for a year in the U.S. Army, Piacenza arrived back in Illinois to the news that his father had passed away: "I lamented and weeped cursing destiny that I would be deprived of seeing my father once more, as I was getting ready to return to Italy."[14] Having saved $1,800 by the end of the year, Piacenza returned to Sant'Anna, this time intending to use his savings to pay off his father's debts, renovate Casa del Colle, and settle permanently in his place of birth. Interrupting his own memoiric narration, Piacenza adds: "Such were my thoughts then. But that was not to be...and therefore you will see me again and again cross the Atlantic Ocean."[15]

Upon arriving in Italy, Piacenza found that his childhood home, originally built in 1590, had fallen into disrepair. After working through the summer to build a new structure for his family, a violent earthquake occured in his village, leaving all of his construction work in ruin. Having to rebuild from scratch, the seemingly substantial savings he had arrived with quickly ran dry, and in order to complete the new home, he was again forced to return to the United States. In a few years' time, the cycle of saving and losing money had repeated itself—after spending a year in Sant'Anna in the mid 1920s (during which time he had married a neighbor named Rosina), Piacenza returned to Highwood, remembering: "Again poverty and debt appeared to me, and again America appeared to me more beautiful than ever."[16]

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[13] Bernardi notes: "Highwood was a community of laborers and craftsmen who worked in the jobs spawned by affluence. Country clubs and new roads were built. Schools, hospitals, and other public buildings were erected. Wealthy people needed chauffeurs, gardeners, maids, cooks, and laundresses. The Italians came to the North Shore, as I have heard time and time again, 'to work for some rich people.'" (*Houses with Names*, 3)
[14] Piacenza, unpublished memoir, 1959, 17.
[15] Ibid, 18.
[16] Ibid, 22.

By 1927, during what he refers to as his "fourth campaign" in the United States, Piacenza's acute dissatisfaction with his economic position becomes much more transparent within his writing, likely exacerbated by the news that his child Louis had been born overseas: "I was not a bit satisfied with myself after many years in different places and jobs. I never was able to raise to a better position like so many of my age had done. I saw many others went into business, and had made fortunes, and I still was a poor working man."[17] In 1929, in a decision which for the first time solidified his residence in the Highwood community, Piacenza purchased a sundry store at the corner of Highwood Avenue and Green Bay Road which sold ice cream, Italian magazines, books, and newspapers. Despite the stock market crash which occured in the year of its purchase, the store sustained itself throughout the 1930s through the patronage of the Highwood community. In 1937, Piacenza had made enough money to purchase a small house near his shop with the assistance of a loan from the First National Bank of Lake Forest. Affordable due to its relatively poor condition, Piacenza diligently worked to remodel it over the next several years, echoing his previous descriptions of Casa de Colle building repairs and foreshadowing the miniaturized homebuilding studio practice which would occupy his post-retirement years.

The occasion of his homebuying, in fact, presented the first and only mention of his architectural model-building within his own autobiographical writing. In 1944, upon making his final house payment, Piacenza wrote a letter of gratitude to bank vice president Philip Spaidell, attaching a photograph of a miniaturized version of Sant'Anna which Piacenza had built in his front yard (fig. 11). Piacenza writes to Spaidell: "It is a miniature copy model exacted in every detail, and I have placed it in front of my home, 103 Highwood Ave., Highwood Ill. I have built it in my spare time, The Little House and Barn you see above the church is the house where I

[17] Piacenza, unpublished memoir, 1959, 22.

was born and lived till I came to America."[18] Though there are indications that he had made his first birdhouse as early as the late 1920s, the letter seems to be the earliest indication of the kind of environment building which would occupy more of Piacenza's time after his retirement from the sundry shop in 1952.[19] On this first small installation, he confirms a nostalgic impetus: "Seeing that I could not go to Italy so soon, I thought of bringing Italy to Highwood."[20]

In 1950, after "twenty years of toiling with uncounted difficulties without a single vacation," Piacenza took out a loan for a final trip to Italy.[21] While there, his schedule was organized around trips to cathedrals, including Santa Maria Maggiore, San Pietro, and San Paolo Fuori le Mura in Rome, the Basilica di Santa Chiara in Assisi, and the Basilica della Santa Casa in Loreto, the last of which famously enshrines the purportedly angel-transported former home of the Virgin Mary. Shortly after his return to Highwood, Piacenza's son Louis, who had been watching the store while his parents were away, offered to take over the responsibilities of the corner store permanently, allowing Aldo to retire. From this point until the year of his death in 1976, Piacenza devoted most of his time to writing poetry, painting, and creating cathedral structures in earnest. In his Italian memoir, much like his English autobiography, Piacenza makes a brief flippant remark about this shift in priorities: "E cosi con quello ore che mi rimaneva mi sollazzavo a dipingere Povera Arte? (*And what else was I to do with my time but create poor art?*)."[22]

Despite understanding his own art practice as a hobby (perhaps even pointing to his lack of training or the necessary frugality of his materials in the passage cited above), Piacenza's commitment to his artistic labor is evidenced by his home studio and documented works—an

[18] Piacenza, (unpublished memoir, 1959), 28.
[19] Michael Bonesteel, "Revisiting Highwood's birdhouse man," *Pioneer Press,* February 1, 1996, n.p.
[20] Jeremy Biles, *Value of Worthless Lives: Writing Italian American Immigrant Autobiographies* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2007), 55.
[21] Piacenza, unpublished memoir, 1959, 32.
[22] Aldobrando Piacenza, unpublished memoir, October 24, 1956, 53.

extensive basement workshop kept his countless woodworking tools in order, and the sizable murals which occupied his walls depict complex architectural sites in copious detail (figs. 12-13). An untitled birdhouse cathedral in the collection of the University of Chicago (fig. 14) exemplifies his compulsion for intricacy in woodwork. Sections of the miniature building's faces are compartmentalized by several horizontal and vertical slivers of wood which might stand in for pilasters or parts of the cathedral's entablature, floors are punctuated by small pedimented windows, and generalized allusions to sculptural ornament accent the facade, including minute tracery within a rose window.

The cathedral birdhouses are consistently marked with the signs of Piacenza's process—atop his complex architectural woodwork, passages of thick paint record the quick movement of workshop brushes, pencil measurement markings often remain visible, and bent nails stick out along wooden foundations (figs. 15-19). Though each construction is patterned after a unique cathedral, a sense of meditative repetition characterizes Piacenza's birdhouse practice, both in the consistent visual grammar of their woodworking style and in the volume of works Piacenza created (at minimum, the 55 birdhouses shown in the Hyde Park Art Center exhibition, and in all likelihood, many more beyond that). Piacenza's labor, including decades of low-wage employment and the meticulous art practice which followed, was tied to a religious devotion since his youth: "My Mother could not read or writte bu[t] was a tireless worke[r] and very diligentl[y] directed all the affairs of the famely. And throught her examples and teachings we learned to well discharge our duty, first toward God and towards all."[23] Mirroring his memoiric narrations of housebuilding within Sant'Anna and Highwood, the repetitive creation of architectural miniatures acted as a continuation of Piacenza's quest for domestic security, in this instance created for the avian creatures of Highwood and borrowing from the formal language of

[23] Piacenza, unpublished memoir, 1959, 3.

houses of God. Piacenza's structures exude solidity despite the delicacy of their ornament—the works are rather heavy, with walls made of wood an inch thick nailed together at right angles.

Corresponding to the devotional nature of their subject matter, the cathedrals' creation within Piacenza's basement workshop was part of an introspective side of Piacenza's personality, which was described by collector Ruth Horwich as "shy and retiring in nature," countering Rosina's stronger entertaining presence.[24] Despite being active within his Highwood community and a regular host for gatherings, the artist generally discouraged anyone from entering his basement workshop while he was at work, making his woodworking a private, and potentially meditative, affair.[25] Engagement with the completed sculptures as individual works, either in Piacenza's yard or in the museums where they are now kept, is also intuitively intimate, as the cathedrals' minute details call for close looking—painted ornament and small slivers of wood compressed into a minimum of physical space serve as reminders of the indeterminately long period of diligent labor performed in Piacenza's workshop. Writing about the labor of miniaturization and its relationship to longing, Susan Stewart proposes that shrunken objects collapse vast amounts of time, space, and meaning as a means of bringing external and distant realities into a closer approximation with the self, both for those who make miniatures and those who collect them.[26]

In her study, Stewart speaks to the inner world of the miniature, which by its nature has an exaggerated interiority that tends to reify the interiority of the viewer. Describing the urge to create dollhouses, for instance, Stewart posits, "Occupying a space within an enclosed space, the dollhouse's aptest analogy is the locket or the secret recesses of the heart: center within center,

[24] Brooks, "Aldobrando Piacenza," 34.
[25] Teta Minuzzo, archivist and former president of the Highwood Historical Society, characterizes Aldo Piacenza as a sociable, respected, and well-liked member of the Highwood community (emails to the author, December 1-3, 2020), as does Brooks, "Aldobrando Piacenza," 19.
[26] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), xii.

within within within."[27] Piacenza's birdhouses, another shrunken residential form, explicitly point to their own internal space. Though the structures largely enclose their hollow interior, they allow a notable opportunity for glancing within—the holes added for birds' entry (figs. 20-22). The ability to see into the internal space of the miniaturized architecture through these openings is rather limited, providing viewers only with a vague sense of the dark realm within, calling attention to the inner world of the sculptures without making them fully visible to those observing from the outside. Even in sculptures that do not include a hole for birds, gaps between walls and hollow pathways down campaniles (figs. 23-24) subtly announce the existence of a private domestic zone of Piacenza's creation. The disruption of pure exteriority and the addition of minute detail draws viewers inward despite the objects' outward-looking architectural referents. The works' semi-perceptible internal spaces, protected by the solidity of Piacenza's woodwork, serve as a sculptural manifestation of the sanctity of the personal interior and the natural security of the (standard-size) home.

The accentuated interiority of Piacenza's birdhouses finds a corollary in his poetry practice, which in addition to capturing his longing for Modena provided an outlet for diaristic confession. In 1932, following the failure of the Highwood Bank where Piancenza maintained all of his accounts, he wrote a poem lamenting his situation on an ice cream menu from the shop he owned on Highwood Avenue:

> 1
> Uncertain and burdened by the hard events
> which keep taking place,
> showing very little sympathy for us.
> 2
> The much awaited Hoover recovery
> still has not arrived.
> 3

[27] Stewart, *On Longing*, 61.

On an unusual earthly face,
with an empty wallet in our bosoms.
4
These bankers dealt with our money
like garbage collectors.
5
The happiest are those who have drunk all the money away.
6
We have therefore understood that
saving up is not worth it.[28]

Aptly printed on salvaged material (similar to the lumberyard scraps which comprise his sculpture), the 1932 poem documents Piacenza's grief at his economic position, which despite many stretches of improvement seemed to continually encounter obstacles. Another poem, written in the early 1950s, finds Piacenza contemplating his lack of earthly time while he reflects on his recent visit to his Apennine hometown:

1
Among beech woods
Sloping cliffs and crossroads
Spent in our mountains
Most Giulivi days
2
Time does not forgive
It comes and then runs away
Or in the furrow of the Atlantic becomes a novel wake
3
O when can I again
Another beautiful summer
Return to the Apsigola[29]

Both of these rather mournful poems exemplify the divulgent character of Piacenza's poetry practice, which often responded to recent happenings and illuminated aspects of his emotional

[28] Brooks, "Aldobrando Piacenza," 10-11.
[29] Piacenza, unpublished memoir, October 24, 1956, 52.

state. The numbered stanza format, used in almost all of Piacenza's poetry, emphasizes the poems' record-keeping quality, at times evoking list-making or dated journal entries.

Within Piacenza's poetry oeuvre, however, are several works substantially more celebratory and sociable, demonstrating the artist's investment with his local community. One undated Piacenza poem kept in the collection of the Highwood Historical Society, for instance, was written in advance of a forthcoming local election in Highwood. In the course of its fourteen stanzas, Piacenza speaks of his pride in Highwood's Italian community and urges his neighbors to *unitevi in squadre* and vote for his prefered candidates: Roth, Fiore, Miniorini, and Judge Santi.[30] In addition to thematically addressing community matters, his poetry circulated widely within his social sphere—Piacenza sent poetry to friends chronicling recent events, had poetry published overseas, and read new verses aloud to his friends and family at gatherings.[31] Subsequent to Christina Ramberg's first meeting with the artist in the 1970s, the Piacenzas hosted Chicago Imagists on several occasions, where they drank wine, learned about Aldo's studio practice, discussed his love of Modena and Italian poetry, and listened to him recite his own verses.[32]

Just as essential to his identity as his personal struggle was Piacenza's affiliation and dependence on community, and particularly the Italian population of Highwood. Throughout Piacenza's memoir are examples of interdependence—while recovering from his 1903 streetcar accident, a young Piacenza received a letter from his parents asking for money. He remembers:

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[30] Minuzzo, poem shared via email to the author, December 3, 2020.

[31] Dennis Adrian, "Aldo Piacenza," Hyde Park Art Center exhibition catalog, 1971, typescript, 2; Aldo's grandson Jerry Piacenza remembers: "He would be constantly carving, or playing the flute, or reciting poems—all the time." (Bonesteel, "Revisiting Highwood's birdhouse man," n.p.)

[32] Dennis Adrian, "Aldo Piacenza," exhibition catalog, Chicago: Hyde Park Art Center, 1971, 2; Lisa Stein, "Taste of Italy," *New City,* February 15-21, 1996.; Adrian, curator and Imagist champion, reflects: "[The artists] got an exhilarating ride on the Piacenzas' hospitality and good feelings; they felt cleansed by the wholeness of Piacenza's life." (Brooks, Jr., "Aldobrando Piacenza: Italian-American Folk Artist, 1888-1976," (master's thesis, New York University, 1995), 35.

> *Thus, they did not know about my sad situation, and during this time I didn't have even $1. While reading this letter I started to cry bitter tears, the kind when one feels utterly alone in the world. Hearing me cry, Domenico Leonardi came in and asked me why I was crying. So, I showed him the letter, and as soon as he read the letter, with a smile, said to me, "If this is what is making you cry, don't worry about it." And in fact he sent the 200 lire to my parents. So you see another proof of what good people they were, that even though my father already owed him 700 lire, he still sent another 200.*[33]

In addition to direct financial support, Piacenza resided with several established Italian immigrant families prior to being able to rent on his own, was led to most of his many temporary jobs through Sant'Anna connections, and relied on the community in order to stay connected to the overseas Italian culture he sorely missed. In 1937, after buying their home, Aldo and Rosina Piacenza began returning the generosity of their community by taking in newly-immigrated boarders, such as Menghina Moscogni and her husband Giosue.[34] In addition to sporadically giving away his cathedral birdhouses to neighbors, Piacenza's woodworking skills were put to use in the Highwood community by making toys for local children and creating wooden wheels for neighborhood competitions of *ruzzolone*.[35]

Eventually emerging from the quiet retreat of Piacenza's basement studio, the birdhouse cathedrals' installation on the Piacenza's lawn made them part of the Highwood social sphere, in conversation with the neighborhood and one another in their semi-public groupings. Installing modeled forms of architecture from all over Italy (as well as a couple stray examples of American architecture, such as a replica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (fig. 25) in

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[33] Bernardi, *Houses with Names*, 69.
[34] Ibid, 228.
[35] Brooks, "Aldobrando Piacenza," 35; In *ruzzolone,* traditionally played with a large wheel of pecorino cheese, a leather strap is attached to a wooden wheel, which is then launched down the street through a prescribed course. In its original context, the participant who moved their wheel through the course with the least amount of strokes took home the wheel of cheese. Highwood resident Enea Cortesi remembers: "We had a fellow, Aldo Piacenza, he used to be crazy about it but he wasn't any good. He used to own the ice cream store on the corner of Highwood Avenue and Greenbay Road. That fellow was crazy about *ruzzolone.* He wanted to stay with me for partner….That game, it come from Italy. They used to play with cheese on the street. With round cheese, naturally. Then, they started making them out of wood. We used to make it ourselves. You gotta have good, hard wood and seasoned, not fresh. Walnut, any kind of heavy wood. Made from the stump of a tree. This Aldo Piacenza used to make them. He made four once. Oh, boy, he was crazy about it." (Bernardi, *Houses with Names*, 207-08)

Washington, D.C.), Piacenza took up the potential of the miniature to build an environment where the globe might shrink to suit his desires. Just as Milan, Florence, Sant'Anna, and Washington, D.C. were made to occupy the same Lilliputian universe outdoors, inside of Piacenza's home, murals of the Italian Lake District were painted nearby Scottish glens and South American jungles (figs. 26-28). In their sheet metal roofing, Piacenza's modeled cathedrals also evoke the rural architecture which dapples the Midwest landscape, producing objects which visually combine European cathedral architecture with an economical structure like the chapel of the Black Madonna in neighboring Missouri (fig. 29). Echoing Menghina Moscogni's assertion that Italians were everywhere, as was the grace of God, the vast territories occupied by Apennine émigrés over the course of the 20th century were made to converge upon a single plot of suburban land through Piacenza's survey of landscape and sacred architecture. Perhaps moved during his final trip to Italy by the angelic transportation of the holy house of Loreto, Piacenza's miniatures carry the cathedrals of Italy overseas, through the conduit of his memory, where they settled in Highwood, Illinois.

The cathedral sculpture installation provided Piacenza an opportunity to envision all of the far flung origins of his longing through a relational tableau within a fixed space, the space of his home. Borrowing Stewart's words, he "conceived of a world which worked" given the means he had.[36] Here, Piacenza's vernacular art environment again finds resonance with the form of the poem, whose similar capacity for temporal fantasy allowed Piacenza to occasionally imagine himself at the top of a skyscraper, on a ship in the Atlantic, and at an Apennine peak within the space of a singular poem. The globally collapsed world of Piacenza's sculptural environment in Highwood is comparable to what David Porter characterizes through the work of Joseph Cornell and Emily Dickinson as a "small, rickety infinitude." Porter discusses the shared preoccupations

[36] Stewart, *On Longing*, xi-xii.

between the poem and the assemblage, each presenting a third kind of representation between word and image. A visual form analogous to the scope of the individual mind, the assemblage offers a "thoroughly American composite genre" whereby immense worlds might be born through the found-object arrangement.[37] As in the small universes created by Cornell, Piacenza's work contracted the world in order to expand the personal, giving him an opportunity to satiate and live amongst the imagery of his spiritual and social desire.

As a venue which sits squarely between public and private realms, the residential yard avails itself to public consumption while being closely tied to the intimate reality of a homeowner's life and identity. Piacenza's front yard art environment both affirmed his connection to his own residence and pointed outward to a sense of home that reached beyond the limits of his property. Expanding past the scale of Cornell's small dioramic objects, Piacenza's art environment also invited the public of Highwood to participate in the artist's spatial fantasy. Depicting architecture equally familiar to many of the other émigrés of his neighborhood, Piacenza offered an intermediate zone for those who lived around him to interact and identify with his devotion, yearning, and pride.

After his passing in 1976, Piacenza's sculptures were continually given away to neighbors by Rosina, as they had been during his lifetime. After Rosina's death in 1990, the home on Highwood Avenue was eventually sold, torn down, and rebuilt by new owners, destroying all murals except for one on the external brick wall of a neighboring property, which has slowly faded from view (fig. 30). In addition to private collections, the dismantled art environment can be found piecemeal in the collections of the University of Chicago, Intuit: the Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, and the Roger Brown Study Collection at the School of the

[37] David Porter, "Assembling a poet and her poems: convergent limit-works of Joseph Cornell and Emily Dickinson," *Word & Image* 10, no. 3 (July-September, 1994): 199.

Art Institute of Chicago, amongst others, where the cathedrals' worn and yellowed enamel paint serves as a reminder of the works' time in open air. Though Piacenza's cathedral forest is no longer part of his Highwood neighborhood, the multitude of commercial and handmade birdhouses which speckle the lawns of neighbors around his former home (figs. 31-32) are reminders of Piacenza's presence, residue of an art environment which established itself as part of the community as it affirmed the individuality of its maker.

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Works Illustrated

Figure 1. Aldobrando Piacenza's yard, photograph by Sam Hernandez, 1974

Figure 2. Aldobrando Piacenza's yard, photographer unknown

Figure 3. Aldo Piacenza's yard, photograph by Sam Hernandez, 1974

Figure 4. Aldo and Rosina Piacenza in front of their garage door, photograph by Sam Hernandez, 1974

Figure 5. Aldobrando Piacenza's front yard, photograph by Sam Hernandez, 1974

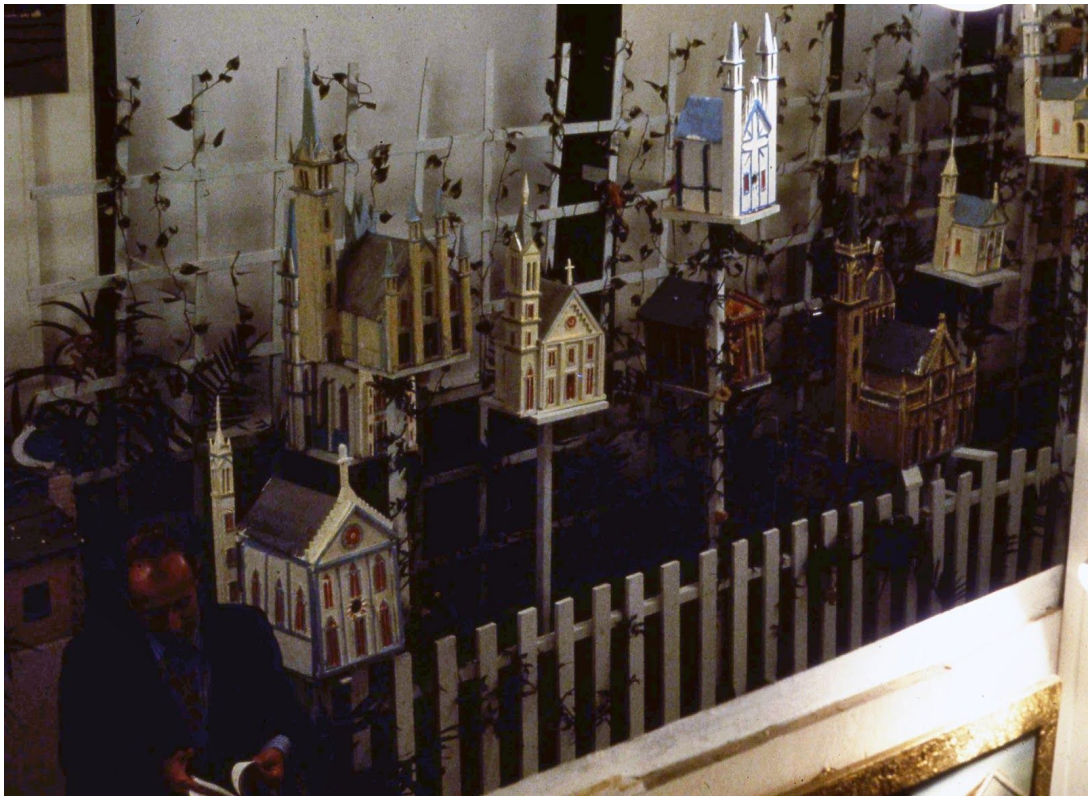

Figure 6. Installation shot of Aldobrando Piacenza's birdhouse cathedrals at Hyde Park Art Center, 1971, photograph by Wayne Sorce.

Figure 7. Aldobrando Piacenza, *Untitled (Milan Cathedral),* c. 1950s, Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 8. Aldobrando Piacenza, *Untitled (Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore),* date unknown.

Figure 9. H. C. Westermann, *The Mysteriously Abandoned New Home,* 1958, pine, birch, vermillion, redwood, glass, paint, and wheels, 212.3 × 57.4 × 55.2 cm (83 5/8 × 22 5/8 × 21 3/4 in.), Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 10. Jacob Baker house (site view), c. 1928, concrete, wood, metal, and mixed media, 44 x 45 ½ x 46 ½ in. John Michael Kohler Center Collection, gift of Lisa Stone and Don Howlett and Kohler Foundation Inc. Photograph by Ron Gordon, 1993.

Figure 11. Aldobrando Piacenza's front yard Sant'Annapelago installation in situ, date unknown, photograph by Clay Morrison.

Figure 12. Interior of Aldo Piacenza's home, photograph by Wayne Sorce, c. 1970s

Figure 13. Aldo Piacenza in his Highwood basement workshop, 1972, photograph by William Tiernan, Pioneer Press

Figure 14. Aldobrando Piacenza, *Untitled (Birdhouse Cathedral),* undated, Painted wood and galvanized zinc, 41 3/8 × 17 × 36 3/8 in., University of Chicago

Figure 15. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* undated, photograph by the author, Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 16. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* c. 1950s, photograph by the author, 28 ½ x 9 ½ x 7 ¾ in, Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 17. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* c. late 1960s, early 1970s, photograph by the author, 34 ¾ x 16 ¼ x 12 ¾ in, Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 18. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* c. late 1960s, early 1970s, photograph by the author, 34 ¾ x 16 ¼ x 12 ¾ in, Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 19. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* c. late 1960s, early 1970s, photograph by the author, 34 ¾ x 16 ¼ x 12 ¾ in, Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

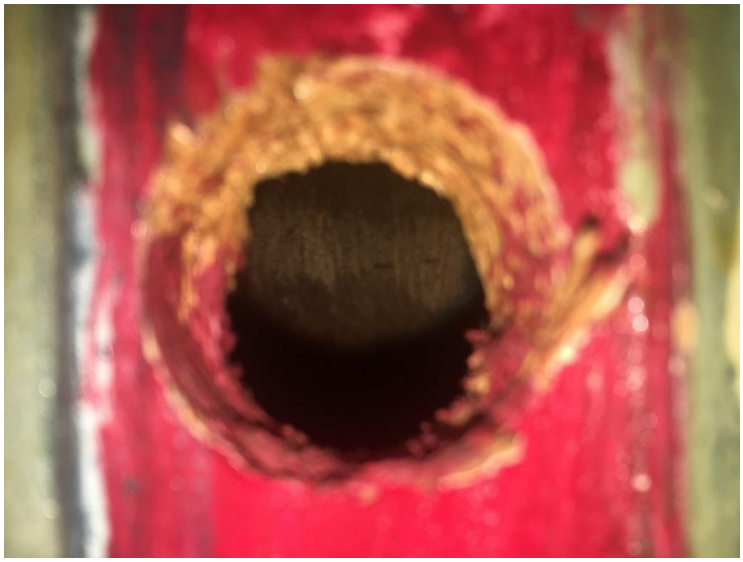

Figure 20. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* c. 1950s, photograph by the author, Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 21. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* undated, photograph by the author, Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 22. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* c. 1950s, photograph by the author, 27 ½ x 9 ⅝ x 9 ⅛ in., Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 23. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* c. 1950s, photograph by the author, 28 x 10 ¾ x 7 ½ in., Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 24. Detail of *Untitled (Birdhouse cathedral),* c. 1950s, photograph by the author, 28 x 10 ¾ x 7 ½ in., Roger Brown Study Collection, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 25. Aldobrando Piacenza, *Untitled (Shrine of the Immaculate Conception)* in situ, Highwood, Illinois, photograph by Clay Morrison

Figure 26. Interior of Aldobrando Piacenza's home, photograph by Wayne Sorce, c. 1970s

Figure 27. Interior of Aldobrando Piacenza's home, photograph by Wayne Sorce, c. 1970s

Figure 28. Interior of Aldobrando Piacenza's home, photograph by Wayne Sorce, c. 1970s

Figure 29. Chapel of the Black Madonna Shrine, near Pacific, Missouri, photograph by the author

Figure 30. Wall adjacent to Aldobrando Piacenza's former property, photograph by the author, taken December 2020

Figures 31 and 32. Houses in Highwood, Illinois, photographs taken by the author, taken December 2020

Figure 33. Aldobrando Piacenza in front of his garage door, photograph by Sam Hernadez, 1974